

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

VOL. XLIII

ISSUED IN AUGUST 1962

No. 8

Copyright 1962 by the State Historical Society of Iowa



Boyhood in Iowa

[These personal recollections of boyhood experiences at West Branch, Iowa, were related by Herbert Hoover in an informal address before the Iowa Society of Washington on November 10, 1927. They were published in *THE PALIMPSEST* for July, 1928, and reprinted in August, 1948, and November, 1951. — THE EDITOR.]

I prefer to think of Iowa as I saw it through the eyes of a ten-year-old boy — and the eyes of all ten-year-old Iowa boys are or should be filled with the wonders of Iowa's streams and woods, of the mystery of growing crops. His days should be filled with adventure and great undertakings, with participation in good and comforting things. I was taken farther West from Iowa when I was ten, to Oregon and thence to that final haven of Iowans — California — where I have clung ever since. Some one may say that these recollections of Iowa are only the illusions of forty years after, but I know better, for I have been back and checked it up. I was told that when I went back everything would have shrunk up and become small and ordinary. For instance, there was Cook's Hill — that great long hill where, on winter nights, we slid down at terrific speeds with our tummies tight to

homemade sleds. I've seen it several times since; it's a good hill and except for the older method of thawing out frozen toes with ice water the sport needs no modern improvement. The swimming hole under the willows down by the railroad bridge is still operating efficiently, albeit modern mothers probably compel their youngsters to take a bath to get rid of clean and healthy mud when they come home. The hole still needs to be deepened, however. It is hard to keep from pounding the mud with your hands and feet when you shove off for the thirty feet of a cross-channel swim. And there were the woods down by the Burlington track. The denudation of our forest hasn't reached them even yet, and I know there are rabbits still being trapped in cracker boxes held open by a figure-four at the behest of small boys at this very time. I suspect, however, that the conservationists have invented some kind of a closed season before now.

One of the bitterest days of my life was in connection with a rabbit. Rabbits fresh from a figure-four trap early on a cold morning are wiggly rabbits, and in the lore of boys of my time it is better to bring them home alive. My brother, being older, had surreptitiously behind the blacksmith shop read in the *Youth's Companion* full directions for rendering live rabbits secure. I say "surreptitiously," for mine was a Quaker family unwilling in those days to have youth corrupted

with stronger reading than the Bible, the encyclopedia, or those great novels where the hero overcomes the demon rum. Soon after he had acquired this higher learning on rabbits, he proceeded to instruct me to stand still in the cold snow and to hold up the rabbit by its hind feet while with his not over-sharp knife he proposed to puncture two holes between the sinews and back knee joints of the rabbit, through which holes he proposed to tie a string and thus arrive at complete security. Upon the introduction of the operation the resistance of this rabbit was too much for me. I was not only blamed for its escape all the way home and for weeks afterwards, but continuously over the last forty years. I have thought sometimes that I would write the *Youth's Companion* and suggest they make sure that this method is altered. For I never see rabbit tracks across the snowy fields that I do not have a painful recollection of it all.

There were also at times pigeons in the timber and prairie chickens in the hedges. With the efficient instruction of a real live American Indian boy from a neighboring Indian school on the subject of bows and arrows, we sometimes by firing volleys in battalions were able to bring down a pigeon or a chicken. The Ritz Hotel has never yet provided game of such wondrous flavor as this bird plucked and half cooked over the small boys' campfire. In those days there were sunfish and catfish to be had. Nor did we possess the modern

equipment in artificial lures, tackle assembled from the steel of Damascus, the bamboos of Siam, tin of Bangkok, the lacquer of China, or silver of Colorado. We were still in that rude but highly social condition of using a willow pole with a butcher string line and hooks ten for a dime. Our compelling lure was a segment of an angle worm and our incantation was to spit on the bait. We lived in the time when fish used to bite instead of strike and we knew it bit when the cork bobbed. And moreover, we ate the fish.

And in the matter of eating, my recollections of Iowa food are of the most distinguished order. You may say that is the appetite of youth, but I have also checked this up. At later stages in my life, I had opportunity to eat both of the presumably very best food in the world, as well as of the very worst. When I ate the worst, my thoughts went back to Iowa, and when I ate of the best I was still sure that Aunt Millie was a better cook. Some thirty years after this time, in visiting Aunt Millie, I challenged that dear old lady, then far along in years, to cook another dinner of the kind she provided on Sabbath Days when we were both youthful. She produced that dinner, and I am able to say now that if all the cooks of Iowa are up to Aunt Millie's standard, then the gourmets of the world should leave Paris for Iowa, at least for Cedar County.

I mentioned the Burlington track. It was a won-

derful place. The track was ballasted with glacial gravels where on industrious search you discovered gems of agate and fossil coral which could with infinite backaches be polished on the grindstone. Their fine points came out wonderfully when wet, and you had to lick them with your tongue before each exhibit. I suppose that engineering has long since destroyed this inspiration to young geologists by using mass production crushed rock.

My earliest realization of the stir of national life was the torch parade in the Garfield campaign. On that occasion, I was not only allowed out that night, but I saw the lamps being filled and lighted. There was no great need for urging voters in our village — there was a Democrat in the village. He occasionally fell to the influence of liquor, therefore in the esteem of our group he represented all the forces of evil. At times he relapsed to goodness in the form of rations of a single gum drop to the small boys who did errands at his store. He also bought the old iron from which the financial resources were provided for firecrackers on the Fourth of July. He was, therefore, tolerated and he served well and efficiently as a moral and political lesson.

But Iowa through the eyes of a ten-year-old boy is not all adventure or high living. Iowa in those years, as in these years, was filled with days of school — and who does not remember with a glow

that sweet-faced lady who with infinite patience and kindness drilled into us those foundations of all we know today? And they were days of chores and labor. I am no supporter of factory labor for children but I have never joined with those who clamored against proper work of children on farms outside their school hours. And I speak from the common experience of most Iowa children of my day in planting corn, hoeing gardens, learning to milk, sawing wood, and the other proper and normal occupations for boys. We had no need of Montessori schools to teach us application. But of more purpose I can bespeak for the strong and healthy bodies which come from it all. Nor was Iowa of those days without its tragedies. Medical science of those times was powerless against the diseases which swept the countryside. My own parents were among the victims.

There was an entirely different economic setting of farm life in Iowa in those days. I am not stating to you that I had at that time any pretense of economics or the farm problem. Upon Uncle Allan's farm where I lived, we did know of the mortgage as some dreadful damper on youthful hopes of things that could not be bought. I do have a vivid recollection that the major purpose of a farm was to produce a living right on the spot for the family. I know by experience that a family then produced all its own vegetables, carried its grain to the nearest mill for grinding on toll, cut

and hauled its own fuel from the wonderful woods ten miles away, and incidentally gathered walnuts. The family wove its own carpets and some of its clothes, made its own soap, preserved its own meat and fruit and vegetables, got its sweetness from sorghum and honey. These families consumed perhaps 80 per cent of the product of their land. Twenty per cent of it was exchanged for the few outside essentials and to pay interest on the mortgage. When prices rose and fell on the Chicago market, they only affected 20 per cent of the product of the farm. I know, and you know, that today as the result of the revolution brought about by machinery and improved methods of planting and breeding animals, and what not, 80 per cent of the product of the farm must go to the market. When the price of these things wobbles in Chicago, it has four times the effect on that family on the farm than it did in those days. If prices are high, they mean comfort and automobiles; if prices are low, they mean increasing debt and privation. I am not recommending the good old days, for while the standards of living in food and clothing and shelter were high enough for anybody's health and comfort, there was but little left for the other purposes of living.

That is probably one reason why the people of Iowa of that time put more of their time in religious devotion than most of them do now. It certainly did not require as much expenditure as their recre-

ation does today. However, those of you who are acquainted with the Quaker faith, and who know the primitive furnishing of the Quaker meeting-house of those days, the solemnity of the long hours of meeting awaiting the spirit to move some one, will know the intense restraint required in a ten-year-old boy not even to count his toes. All this may not have been recreation, but it was strong training in patience. And that reminds me that I have a brand of Iowa still upon me, for one of my earliest recollections of that great and glorious state was stepping barefooted on a red hot iron chip at my father's blacksmith shop, the scar of which I still carry.

But there are few scars that people carry from the state of Iowa. The good Lord originally made it the richest stretch of agricultural land that ever blessed any one sovereign government. It was populated by the more adventurous and the more courageous, who fought their way along the ever-extending frontier. They builded there in so short a period as seventy-five years a people who today enjoy the highest standard of living, the highest average of intelligence, the highest average degree of education that has ever blessed a single commonwealth. There is no man or woman born of Iowa who is not proud of his native state.

HERBERT HOOVER